

Skiping School to Save the Earth

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Body

LONDON — Thousands of young people in Britain are expected to abandon their classrooms and take to the streets on Friday to join a growing movement to protest the lack of action on climate change.

Inspired by a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who cut class on a weekly basis last year to stage sit-ins outside Sweden's Parliament, young climate campaigners are planning to walk out of British schools, colleges and universities across 40 towns and cities on Friday.

"I've always had a strong fascination with the environment, and I've always been aware of climate change and sustainable living, but when I saw thousands of kids around the world striking for the cause it inspired me to start my own," said Anna Taylor, 17, a co-founder of the UK Student Climate Network, which is coordinating the strikes.

The global movement, known as the Youth Strike 4 Climate, gained momentum last October following the publication of a landmark report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warning that humanity had just 12 years to avert the consequences of catastrophic climate change, with worsening food shortages, rising sea levels, floods and wildfires.

The content of the report shocked Ms. Thunberg and drove her to stake out Parliament to demand that politicians start to treat climate change as a crisis. Her demonstrations struck a chord with thousands of young people from Australia to Europe, who have periodically been ditching their classrooms to carry out similar protests.

For Britain, this will be its first coordinated nationwide school strike on the issue. In addition to a demand that the government declare a state of emergency and communicate the severity of the threat to the public, the campaigners are calling to make climate change a priority in the national curriculum.

"We are taught a little bit about it at school, but nowhere near enough, and the severity of the situation is not addressed at all," Ms. Taylor said in an interview.

"Youth voices are too often left out of the discussion when it comes to climate change," said Jake Woodier, a member of the UK Youth Climate Coalition, a nonprofit youth organization that works to mobilize positive action on climate change.

"Our current trajectory is completely incompatible with a clean, safe environment not only for ourselves, but future generations as well."

A second round of protests is being organized for March 15 in conjunction with another global youth strike.

Skipping School to Save the Earth

The youth initiative has received some criticism from climate-change deniers, who claim the campaigners are being manipulated by politicians and environmental organizations.

But some of those critiques have drawn a backlash. Belgium's environment minister, Joke Schauvliege, resigned after falsely claiming that the country's intelligence services held evidence that "unnamed powers" were behind a student-led climate march that drew more than 35,000 participants.

The planned strikes have drawn a mixed response in British schools, with some encouraging students to join the protests and others threatening to punish them.

"My school was not supportive at the start. They said I would get detention for unauthorized absence," Ms. Taylor said. "But then I spoke to my head teacher yesterday. She said she supports it now and will authorize my absence and anyone else participating as long as they have permission from their parents."

A spokesman for the Department for Education said that the matter was for individual schools, but highlighted that pupils could take term-time leave only in "exceptional circumstances," and when the leave had been authorized by a head teacher.

Bonnie Morely, 16, who will be participating in the protests with eight friends from her school in southwest London, said that her head teacher had taken down posters in the common areas that advertised the event.

"They're treating us like we are doing something really wrong," Ms. Morley said, adding: "The future of our planet is looking really bleak, and all the politicians are asleep at the wheel. We have to wake them up, and I think thousands of kids on the streets will do just that."

PHOTO: Belgian students in Brussels on Thursday called for urgent measures to combat global warming. (PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE LECOCQ/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK)

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Skipping School to Save the Earth

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